



# HISTORICIZING THE CONCEPT OF TRIBE WITH REFERENCE TO KORAGAS

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## ABSTRACT

India has one of the largest tribal concentrations in the world. In India they have been alienated not only from the development processes, but even from their own dwellings. As mainstream development processes tended to create social spaces of inequality, tribal communities face marginalisation virtually in every sphere of social life over decades. Tribals are the marginalized population everywhere in the world, among them Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) are the most backward because of their geographic isolation, distinctive culture, primitive traits, and shyness of contact with the community at large, economic backwardness coupled with discrimination and exploitation by the outsiders. They are deprived of basic needs of their life and suffering a lot due to social exclusion and discrimination. Koragas of Kasaragod, one among the five PVTG in Kerala, the most subjugated are on the verge of extinction and bear the outcome of social evils and deprivation from time immemorial. Considering the immense odds against the tribes, the present paper discuss how Koragas, an old primitive tribal group has been marginalized and thrown in to the lowest bottom of the social ladder. It tries to high light the socio- economic conditions of Koragas.

**KEY WORDS:** Tribes, Primitive Vulnerable Tribal Group, Koragas of Kasaragod, Marginalization, Subjugation.

## Introduction

Tribal population of the world has been always under pressure and danger. The indigenous rights and situations of the tribal populations have been under threat. There is severe violation of their natural right to live and progress in their own phase. They are compelled to cope with the systems and structures created by the modernized world. In the last two centuries as the tribal population experienced massive expulsion and hardships due to oppression and exploitation. "It has found that the increased velocity of marginalization and deprivation of the aboriginals of the most of the lands of the world associated with industrialization and colonization during and after eighteenth century".<sup>1</sup> (UN Report on Tribals, 2009)

The tribal population is an integral part of India's social fabric and has the second largest concentration after that of the African continent. It is more than the total population of France and Britain and four times that of Australia. In many Third World societies, people of the lower classes or castes and tribal communities are pushed to the margins of society as a result of various historical and developmental factors. In India, they were marginalized through a systematic process of alienating them from their lands and resources in the name of "progress" and "development." Today the word "tribe" stands for numerous and varied communities scattered all over the globe, variously called "aboriginal people" or as "indigenous people" in the discourse of the UN and Human Rights. In India the word "tribe" is used to denote "original inhabitants" or in other words, "adivasis."

Historically, the adivasi's have been marginalized from the mainstream of Indian society through the caste system. They have been traditionally treated as outside the caste structure and are seen as entirely impure from within the Brahminic caste order. Adivasi societies, in turn, consider themselves distinct from the majority population of India, as well as from most other organized forms of religion. Indian civilization consisted of many different societies following different systems. Some people followed the Varna or caste system, where people were classified on the basis of their occupation. There were some people who did not follow the caste system and rituals prescribed by others and were often called tribes. The tribal societies did not have hierarchy or class inequality as the members were tied by family relationships. Some tribes were nomadic and moved from one place to another, while others earned their living from agriculture. They did not keep any written records about their traditions but had a rich history of arts, rituals and customs, which they passed to the next generation through oral communication. 'The consciousness of the distinct and separate identity of all the tribes in India taken as a whole is a part of modern consciousness, brought in to being by the colonial state and confirmed by its successor after independence'.<sup>2</sup>

A tribe is always divided into various subsections with different levels of awareness, differential exposure to development and developing distinct identities of their own tribal communities generally represent a socially structured clan based hierarchy with their own historically evolved social institutions which govern the entire socio economic process.

The term 'tribe' originates from Latin word 'tribus' means a socially cohesive unit associated with a territory, the members of which regard themselves as autonomous. Usually a tribe possesses a distinct dialect and cultural traits. Their social relations are dominated by kinship, a relation based on personal relationships and of cooperation and non violence.

Sir Herbert Risley defined tribes as "a collection of families bearing a common name which as a rule does not denote any specific occupation claiming common descent from a mythical or historical ancestor but in some parts of India held together by obligations of blood feud than by tradition of kinship; usually speaking the same language and occupying, professing or claiming to occupy a definite tract of the country. A tribe is not necessarily endogamous; it is not an invariable rule that A man of a particular tribe must marry a woman of that tribe and cannot marry a woman of a different tribe".<sup>3</sup>

Another definition by Charles Winick, "A social group usually with a definite area, dialect, cultural homogeneity and unifying social organization. It may include several sub groups, such as sibs or villages. A tribe ordinarily has a leader and may have a common ancestor as well as a patron deity. The families of small communities making up the tribe are linked through economic, Social, religious, family or blood ties".<sup>4</sup>

Oxford dictionary tribe means 'race of people now applied specially to a primary aggregate of the people in primitive or barbarous conditions under a head man or chief'.<sup>5</sup> These definition or statements does not explain fully the Indian situation. But we can say that term tribe signifies a group of people residing in a common descent and within every tribe kinship operates as a strong, associative, regulative and integrating principle.

The tribal population differs from one another in racial traits, language, social organization, economy, religion, beliefs, culture and population. "From the point of view of geographical distribution, the tribal people have been divided into five territorial divisions based on their historical, ethnic and socio cultural relations, viz, Himalayan region, Middle India, North East India, Western India and South India".<sup>6</sup> The ancestry of the present tribal population of India is traced to 3 types 1.Negrito, 2.The Proto- Australoid 3.The Mongoloid.

During 1931 census Dr. J.H Hutton first of all, applied the term "Primitive tribe" which received acceptance in those days. In the Government of India Act 1935 a specific mention was made on "Backward tribes". Verrier Elwin recommended the setting up of National parks for the tribal so that their contact with outside world could be regulated and kept to the minimum.<sup>7</sup> G.S.Ghurye, took the opposite opinion and argued against segregation of tribal people. He described the tribals as backward Hindus. According to him, most of the tribal groups has absorbed elements mainstream culture in varying degrees, only a few had remained relatively untouched'.<sup>8</sup>

Tribal people groups who are food-gatherers in the forests, with diminishing population having pre-agricultural technology and very low or little literacy rates can be called as Primitive Tribes. Cholanaiikans, Kurumbas, Kattunaikans, Kadars and Koragas are the five primitive tribal groups in Kerala..

The subjugation of Koragas continued for centuries and the submerged group were not able to rise or even unable to make a voice for their basic rights. Even though many developmental activities have been implemented to improve their living conditions, they continue to lag behind the general community in the case of education, health, employment and social mobility. M.V.Rao reiterated that "some groups of people of the Indian sub-continent had to traverse a long path through prehistoric periods with many bitter experiences of stresses and strains

for their social stability".<sup>9</sup>

### Historical Background of Koragas

The first chronicle available about the Koragas, is that of Francis Buchanan (written in February, 1801) who assembled the Koragas at Udupi in South Canara District'. While he gives a general description of the Koragas, not much is available about their history, except a reference to the rule of their Chieftain, Hubashika for a short period. For this, Buchanan seems to have depended on Ramappa Vormika, whom he befriended and called him an intelligent Brahmin. A detailed description about the Koragas (as well as other 'slave' castes) is available in Ramappa Vormika's work, "The Memoirs of the Origin of the Slaves" <sup>10</sup> which was written in 1819.

Edgar Thurston said, "Koragas are summed up in the Madras Census Report 1991, as being a wild tribe of basket makers and labourers, chiefly found in Mudubidri, Puttur and Uppinangadi taluk of South Canara. As M.T.Walhouse writes, they are a very quiet and inoffensive race; small and slight, the men seldom exceeding five feet six inches; black skinned, like most Indian aborigines, thick lipped, noses broad and flat and hair rough and bushy. Their principal occupation is basket making and they must labour for their masters. They live on the outskirts of villages and may not dwell in houses of clay or mud but in huts of leaves called Koppus. Like many of the wild tribes of India; they are distinguished by unswerving truthfulness. The word of a Koragar is proverbial".<sup>11</sup>

The ethnic and anthropometrical features reveal that the Koragas are aboriginal Dravidian tribe. Thurston thinks it probable that 'they were in fact the aboriginals of the region who were dispersed, dispossessed and turned into slaves by the influx of Aryans from the north of India'.<sup>12</sup>

Thurston identified 3 divisions among Koragas, Kuntu, Chippi and van to on the basis of dress and ornaments worn by them. Kuntu means typical clothes. Chippi wear ornaments made of coconut shells. Vanti wear particular type of large ear rings. Koragas were described by 1901 census report of Madras as a wild tribe of basket makers and labourers. (Thurston 1909). There are clans like Bangerannaya, mookenyaya, kunder annaya, salvannaya and gujjarannaya. Endogamy at group level and exogamy at clan level are observed. They are short to medium stature with curly hair and very distinct eyes and lips. Koragas are, a very quiet and inoffensive race, small and submissive people.

Majority of the tribes are non vegetarians. Rice is their favourite food stuff and they also use cereals, herbs and roots. The Koragas, Ulladans, Kuravans, and Paniyan are known to eat beef, buffalo and bison meat. The Muthuvans, Urali Kurumas and Paniyans eat land crabs, prawns and snails. According to Luiz, their day starts and ends with the battle for food, and they seldom find time to earn for other essential needs. All tribes are betelnut, pan and tobacco and drink tea, coffee. They are very much attracted to alcohol.

The District Gazetteer of Dakshina Kannada reveals that till the beginnings of the 20th century, the Koragas were treated as slave labourers in weekly fairs and yearly fairs in the district. The price of a male slave was three pagodas (equal to Rs. 14) and of 5 the female slave 5 pagodas. Koragas became PTG in 1986, until then included in ST.

'Kora' refers to the sun and the name may have originated from their conventional worship of the sun. There is a possibility that their name is a corruption of Koruvar which in Tulu means the people of the hills. Koragas have their highly distinct and unique folk culture and language, though it has no script, but using Kannada script to write their language. 'Traditional societies present different cultural idioms which reflect the outlook of the people and the character of their institutions'.<sup>13</sup> They perform simple ceremonies during death, puberty and marriage. In every Koraga colony we can find small stones, a few plants or trees representing different cults. Koragas have not been removed from the clutches of superstitious beliefs and practices. Again, tradition and authority siamese terms in history refer to basic political phenomenon, for there was never a political order or community without both".<sup>14</sup>

The tribes of India constitute a rich, unique, varied and critical element of Indian tradition. Tribes have, or had their own language or dialect, their own traditions, customs, myths and ritual practices, deities, arts and performances, etc. There is ongoing transition bringing tremendous changes in the cultural identity of the tribes because of the dominance and interference of external forces and the cultural invasion of modernity. In spite of all the revolutionary changes that have taken place in the society through the ages, the tribes are reluctant to merge with general stream of life and continue to keep their separate identity because they maintained an unblemished affinity towards nature and surroundings.

According to Vidyarthi, "from the point of view of social structure, Tribes developed their own styles of life including their traditional customary laws for exercising social and political control and whenever there have been interferences from outside, they have reacted adversely and in cases even violently".<sup>15</sup> In history we knew the examples of organized efforts and protest movements of submerged groups at various levels against the exploitation and attempts of dominance. "The protest ideologies of the Backward Classes movements reveal four organizing principles: reinterpretation of myths of origin or one's own religion,

rejection of Hinduism and Aryan religion and culture, civil rights and class conflict".<sup>16</sup> But at nowhere in the history of Koragas, 'The consciousness of the distinct and separate identity of all the tribes in India taken as a whole is a part of modern consciousness, brought in to being by the colonial state and confirmed by its successor after independence'.<sup>17</sup>

Irrespective of progressive measures, tribals never experienced a space in public life and in mainstream society. They are drifting to nowhere. They could neither hold on to their age old ways of living nor fit themselves in a modern society. They have abandoned their traditional occupations like hunting, gathering of forest products and similar other primitive occupations but they are not able to acquire new jobs equalled with advanced communities. Most of them became farm labourers, or workers under private owners.

Since the tribals are socially isolated group, they have almost lost their self respect and experience, strong inhibitions preventing their coming to the forefront of the social life. "We have to restore and foster the aboriginal's self respect by protecting him from loss of land, bonded service, debt and oppression, to shield him from malaria and other sickness, to teach him agriculture and an economic organization suited to his habitat mentality and to educate him not merely to retain and value his own tribal culture, but also take and hold his due place in the economic, political and cultural life of modern India".<sup>18</sup>

Regarded as ceremonially impure and unclean and were considered untouchables by the main stream social group. The subjugated groups became castes forced to perform less desirable menial jobs like sweeping, cleaning of excreta, removal of dead bodies, leather works. It is also said that the Koragas were enslaved around 6<sup>th</sup> A.D. Since then, they were slave labourers and sent to forests. There are serious issues like extreme poverty, non percolation of the benefits of developments to the lower strata of the tribals, psychological stresses and strains of tribals, issues of livelihoods, problems in cultural environment, land alienation and debt and the intensity of these issues is very high among Koragas. They still face the practice of social exclusion and trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty and marginalization. They still live in colonies which are segregated from the rest of the communities. Their new settlements are not suitable for continuing their old occupations like hunting or collecting honey or forest products. The result is that they are placed in far worse economic position than they had been in previously. They are forced to think that their former slavery is far better than their independence today in the present economic conditions as under old system they were at least assured of one day's food.

### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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